

THE FAB FORMATION [OF A MEDIA ARTS ORGANIZATION]

By Larry Loewinger

When sixties communitarianism wed seventies activism, the Association of Independent Video and Filmmakers was born. Twenty years later, one founding member looks back at what motivated independent mediamakers to come together, just then, over arts-related issues.

"Nobody thought that filmmakers could agree on anything, let alone an organization."
--Ed Lynch, founding board member and first president, AIVF.

New York teetered on the verge of bankruptcy during the early and mid-seventies. But it was a heroic time for independent film- and videomakers: Film Forum was launched early in the decade, AIVF began a few years later, and in the late seventies, the Independent Feature Project (IFP) took root. As Film Forum's Karen Cooper recently observed, "The sixties mentality--that the world could be changed and that we had the power to change it--spilled over into the new decade and provided film and video artists with a sense of empowerment. Nothing stopped on December 31, 1969," Cooper continued, "and nothing started on January 1, 1970. We were living through an evolution." She added that AIVF and other alternative institutions formed at the time were an outgrowth of the civil rights and Vietnam war years. "I don't think any of our lives, our culture, and our creativity can be separated from that context," Cooper said.

Those of us who lived in Manhattan at the time wanted to believe, much like the famous New Yorker cartoon map that shows a bloated Manhattan and a shrunken hinterland, the Big Apple was where all of America's contradictory cultural impulses got regurgitated and redefined, if not resolved. One of the raging debates of the era was over media, its nature, its content, and its impact on all of us. Marshall McLuhan's study, *Understanding Media*, was not simply an accidental artifact of the late sixties. It was a seminal book, less for what it said than for the fact it acknowledged the enormous power television held over our lives. It was also no accident that McLuhan was Catholic. Church laity and clergy were in the forefront of this examination of media.

John Culkin, who died recently, was a Catholic priest and director of the Center for *Understanding Media*, a New York-based organization exploring the impact of media on society. Some thought the tall, lanky Culkin was a basketball player in priest's garb. But he was both a visionary and a consummate fundraiser whose ample contacts throughout the film and video world were themselves a legend. Among the activities of his Center was the disbursement of NEA grants to film- and videomakers who taught in the public schools. As an American Film Institute (AFI) board member, Culkin became disenchanted early on with the Institute's profligate waste, its lack of interest in media education, and its Hollywood orientation. In 1973, he was looking to form an alternative organization. Culkin managed to get a Department of Education grant, which was originally intended for retraining people in poverty pockets. In the autumn of 1973 Culkin had seed money but no organizer for the would-be organization.

Enter Ed Lynch. The son of a West Virginia preacher, Lynch had migrated from Pittsburgh to New York to work as a camera person. Among his camera credits, interestingly enough, is *Marjoe*, the story of a flamboyant preacher. Lynch had a way with words and a way of bringing people together. Amalie Rothschild, a founding AIVF board member, once aptly described his operating style as "evangelical."

When early members of AIVF talk about the seventies in New York, the recurring theme is their isolation from one another and from the larger worlds of production and funding in Los Angeles and Washington. Phil Messina, a founding board member and filmmaker then and now, recalled that at that time the community was fragmented. "We wanted to do something bigger than just being commercial artists," he said. "We wanted some kind of movement, a way to help each other. We wanted to keep the old vision alive." Steve Gyllenhaal, now a feature director but then an early AIVF activist, echoed the sentiment: "I wanted to be a part of the independent film community. Here's Charlton Heston, here's Hollywood. I wanted to be in a community that was making other kinds of films."

Another founding board member, filmmaker Martha Coolidge, recently talked about the practical steps taken to launch AIVF. "Ed [Lynch] came to my house and said he was asking me and [video artist] Ed Emshwiller to found this organization. We talked in endless meetings," she said. "Gradually we invited more and more people." Inviting Emshwiller in as a founding board member highlights one of the many then-unresolved questions that plagued AIVF: What art form was it meant to represent? Documentaries? Features? Experimental work? Video? One group, several, or all of them? At the outset, the membership was primarily composed of and led by documentarians. But these were documentarians in the gravitational pull of the feature world.

A Fluster of Activity

In the early days there was a steady drumbeat of board and membership meetings, public events, screenings, and workshops. A few of these efforts, such as the creation of workshops for screenwriters and directors, reflected the pull of feature filmmaking, but others simply allowed makers to unleash a great deal of pent up energy. According to Rothschild, "All a member had to do was take the initiative and organize an event. That's how the programming got started." AIVF's original board initially met once a week and later cut back to once a month. After these meetings, Rothschild continued, "everyone retired to a neighborhood bar where we played pool and we drank. It was marvelous. We really got to know each other." Screenings were held almost as often as members made films. At the end of 1974 a series of screenings organized by AIVF at the Fifth Avenue Cinema, now part of the New School, boasted the title *Independent Cinema Lives!* Blending documentary and dramatic works, it boldly announced the arrival of a new generation of filmmakers. It also adumbrated the path that several of these filmmakers would take to the West Coast.

In its earliest form, AIVF resembled a commune. The organization's first office space on 99 Prince Street in lower Manhattan merely physicalized the structure of the group. There was great activity and little hierarchy. At a summer board meeting in 1976, a filmmaker attended to propose a worthy project. When the board showed interest, the proposer suggested that people working on such projects be paid. The board unanimously laughed, a response that was recorded

for prosperity in the minutes of the meeting. As counter-culturists from the sixties, board members, including myself, saw money in an ambivalent light: it was both a necessary evil and a lubricant to the films and projects we wanted to make. Yet the remainder of the same board meeting was spent deciding how to spend what little money the organization had. Money to run a local, then a regional, and finally a national organization would eventually alter the manner and, ultimately, the goals of AIVF.

Acting Up

"It was a small yet significant drama played out by a number of those who care passionately--indeed, on occasion, feverishly--about the art of the film in America," the New York Times reported in the fall of 1974. The plot swirled around the question of whether or not taxpayers should support the American Film Institute (AFI). The AFI wanted its own line item in the federal budget so that it would be free from the National Endowment for the Arts' watchful eye. It is old news now, but at the time it was a very big deal. The issue put AIVF in a glaring national spotlight and at odds with the Hollywood establishment. It was perceived, as Gyllenhaal observed, "as a David and Goliath battle," which ended happily for independents.

Through AIVF, members of the New York film community created a coalition of organizations, a massive letter writing campaign, and an intense lobbying effort in Washington that would ultimately lead to the defeat of the bill the AFI so dearly wanted. There were other battles--over copyright and authorship, and a continuing debate over the deployment of public television monies--that would have more of a lasting impact on the film and video community, but the fight against the AFI was the first, and it was a defining moment for AIVF. The organization's success was fueled by a great and willing reservoir of volunteer labor. It clearly couldn't be tapped forever.

In just a few years the organization would grow from a local, participatory group of a few hundred members to a national organization of several thousand. It would migrate from the Tribeca loft of its founding president, Ed Lynch, to 99 Prince Street, and eventually to its present home at 625 Broadway. As the organization uneasily shed its sixties communitarian ethos for the more enduring work of advocacy politics, it became a permanent fixture of the national independent film and video scene.

To Fund or Not to Fund

Along with the advocacy efforts, the formation of the Independent Creative Artists and Producers (ICAP as it was popularly known) was one of AIVF's first successes. Charles Levine, one of the few experimental filmmakers active in AIVF, saw early on the possibilities of a multi-channel cable environment for filmmakers. Filmmaker and marketer Kitty Morgan and P.O.V co-executive producer Marc Weiss, both board members in 1976, gave practical shape to Levine's ideas. The first deal they struck was with Home Box Office, which was looking for short films to fill out their two- to three-hour feature time slots. "I'll never forget the contract we cut with them," Weiss confessed recently: "They would pay us \$1 per minute per 100,000 subscribers. Initially, if they were to show a 10-minute film they would pay us \$10. If they had a million subscribers they would pay us \$100. Because their subscriber base expanded so rapidly, they were paying us hundreds of dollars per minute. We were getting checks for several thousand

dollars for an eight minute film. Once they figured out what was going on, they never renewed the contract."

Of the three building blocks that gave the AIVF life and structure--the early advocacy efforts, ICAP, and, in 1975, the incorporation of the Foundation for Independent Video and Film (FIVF), which could dispense funds and receive grants--it was the last that seemed the most innocent and which brought about the most immediate changes. Ed Lynch saw growth in terms of the organization's ability to attract production funds, which could then be dispensed to the filmmaking community through FIVF. The board, which didn't want to be in the position of having to choose one project over another, initially resisted Lynch's attempts to secure production funds. When, for instance, soon after the American Film Institute's defeat at the hands of AIVF, the AFI quietly approached FIVF with an offer to administer its independent filmmaker program, the board flatly refused. About a year later, in 1976, the Ford Foundation and the NEA announced a \$500,000 fund for documentary programs intended for public television. Lynch wanted this money to be earmarked for FIVF and the independent film and video community. When interviewed for the tenth anniversary of AIVF, Lynch said he "wanted to broker that money for a new relationship between independents and [public television] stations." Again the board resisted. Ultimately it yielded, but the damage had been done; the television fund monies went to WNET. At the time I, like most board members, thought Lynch was wrong in wanting to disperse production funds. It would have required a great deal of political skill to insulate granting panels from the everyday pressures of running an organization. With the comfortable vision of hindsight I can only wonder what AIVF and FIVF would be like today. Would it have made ITVS unnecessary?

By the time Lynch decided to step down as president in 1977, the talents of the founder/organizer were at odds with the needs of the organization. Lynch's departing missive, included in one of the letters he sent periodically to AIVF members, intimated a gentle passing of the scepter to new president documentarian Ting Barrow: "A new line to the eye of an old woman, a new wrinkle in a vaudeville act, a new fold for the diapers, a furrow across the farm, and a new President of the Association of Independent Video and Filmmakers."

In the four years between 1973 and 1977, several founding board members, who were moving on to the feature world, followed in Lynch's footsteps, either by stepping down from leadership roles, leaving the organization, or abandoning New York City. With the departures of the early board members, there was little in the way of a permanent structure for the organization. That was left to the next generation.

The transition that followed--from a president- and board-led local entity with an active membership to a national executive-directed operation with a largely passive national membership--was sometimes smooth, more often brutal, but always interesting. In sheer numbers membership increased dramatically, but few new members attended meetings. With the exception of Marc Weiss, the founding board members had all departed by 1980.

Organizing the Organization

Three things changed AIVF as rapidly and profoundly as anything Ed Lynch and the founding

board had done: the painful Ting Barrow presidency, the government-sponsored CETA program, and the money from the NEA-funded Short Film Showcase (which created some administrative stability).

Ting Barrow, who followed Ed Lynch as president, gave all the appearances of being comfortable with the vague, centrist, communitarian rhetoric that soothed so many members. But, in fact, as Marc Weiss recently observed, "Barrow was involved in the production of a lot of [left wing] political films. He gave hours and hours of his time. He was totally committed to this work." It was all the more surprising then when Barrow agreed to work on a film for the South African government promoting business in that country. A letter to the editor appeared in a very early edition of *The Independent* demanding his resignation. The bitter controversy that ensued put in high relief the question: What was AIVF--a trade association whose members were free to do what they chose, or a political institution whose membership was conditioned on allegiance to a set of clear cut principals? Since it was really both, although headed much more in the direction of a trade association than a political party, the answer was fudged. Barrow left AIVF in 1979, and eventually changed careers. The practical result of his kamikaze ride was to reduce the power of the board presidency. But that alone would not have brought about as rapid a transformation as did the money from the Comprehensive Employment Training Act (CETA).

CETA made the AIVF grow up. First administered in 1977, the CETA program earmarked federal monies to local governments to provide jobs for the unemployed. In New York City a certain amount was designated for the arts and a portion of that found its way to the FIVF. CETA meant that the organization had to award individuals money to work for local community groups or pursue individual projects, something the founding board had refused to do. (FIVF offered yearly salaries of \$10,000 to 14 media artists selected from more than 300 applicants in 1977.) The CETA program also forced AIVF to acquire the administrative skills necessary for handling large sums of money. Mostly, it raised serious questions about the racial, class, ethnic, and gender makeup of AIVF leadership and, to a lesser extent, membership. According to former board chair Lillian Jimenez, "CETA allowed media workers to come in contact with community groups and institutions that heretofore it had not been involved with. It also allowed for a different level of organizing and advocacy work." Jimenez added that Bill Jones was hired with CETA money to edit early issues of *The Independent*.

The Short Film Showcase, conceived by the NEA as a means of cultivating an audience for short films, required an additional full-time staffer. The NEA provided \$100,000-plus in support money to carry out the project, which involved enlarging a group of selected shorts from 16mm to 35mm and distributing them to theatrical exhibitors free of charge. The filmmakers also received an honorarium.

By 1980 AIVF was an organization transformed. Gone were the heroic days of meetings, screenings, workshops, and membership activity. They had been replaced by an office staff, an executive director, and a magazine that has since become the focal point of AIVF activity.

Some of the inspiration and creative energy that had been so wonderful to both witness and participate in during the organization's formation stage had been lost. Lynch suggested it was

probably inevitable that, when choosing between career and voluntary service to the community, people would eventually opt to take care of their own needs. "Fundamentally," he concluded, "people matured out of the organization. It was a perfectly natural change." The first four years of AIVF were filled with moments of extraordinary possibility. Some possibilities, like the funding of independent films and video, never materialized. Others, like the CETA program and the Short Film Showcase, influenced the development of the organization, but vanished as government money dried up. But the very first disputes, both with the AFI and over copyright issues, were the benchmarks for AIVF's future advocacy efforts. Out of the efforts has evolved a larger, more structured institution with an in-house library, a festival bureau, and its own mouthpiece, *The Independent*. Some things, however, do remain the same: Members today, as in years past, gain a certain comfort in knowing they are not alone in their struggle as independents.

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